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ACTION EAP-00

INFO LOG-00 NP-00 AID-00 ACQ-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 SRPP-00
DS-00 FBIE-00 UTED-00 VC-00 TEDE-00 INR-00 VCE-00
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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S 11/22/00 MEETING WITH VICE MINISTER BIN: LY TONG INCIDENT

1. (SBU) FOLLOWING HIS PRESENTATION OF VIEWS REGARDING THE OVERALL SUCCESS OF THE VISIT OF PRESIDENT CLINTON (REFTEL), VICE MINISTER BIN EXPRESSED HIS AND HIS GOVERNMENT'S CONCERN OVER THE LY TONG INCIDENT WHICH THE AMBASSADOR HAD RAISED. BIN PICKED UP ON THE AMBASSADOR'S REFERENCE TO TONG AS A HIJACKER AND THAT
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THIS WAS A DANGEROUS ACT WHICH SHOULD BE PUNISHED. HE NOTED THE VIETNAMESE LEADERSHIP AND PEOPLE HAD REACTED NEGATIVELY TO HIS DROPPING LEAFLETS OVER VIETNAM, EXPLAINING THAT HE HAD ONLY BEEN RELEASED FROM JAIL FOR HIS PREVIOUS OFFENSE OF THIS NATURE AT THE REQUEST OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT. (NOTE: TONG WAS CONVICTED IN VIETNAMESE COURTS FOR A SIMILAR OFFENSE IN WHICH HE HIJACKED A COMMERCIAL FLIGHT FROM THAILAND AND DUMPED LEAFLETS OVER VIETNAM. HE WAS RELEASED IN A GENERAL VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT AMNESTY IN 1998, MUCH TO THE SURPRISE OF THE EMBASSY SINCE HE DID NOT MEET THE GENERAL VIETNAMESE CRITERIA FOR CONSIDERATION. PRIOR TO THE AMNESTY, THE EMBASSY AND CONGEN HAD MADE A BLANKET APPEAL FOR ALL U.S. CITIZENS IN DETENTION TO BE RELEASED UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF THE AMNESTY. END NOTE)

2. (SBU) BIN SAID TONG'S ACTIONS CAST A NEGATIVE TONE OVER THE VISIT AND INSISTED THEY HAD TO BE CLEARED UP. HE SAID THE U.S. HAD "PROMISED" MEMBERS OF THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN THE U.S. WOULD NOT BE PERMITTED TO DO THINGS WHICH "DAMAGED RELATIONS" AND THAT THE U.S. MUST DO SOMETHING ABOUT LY TONG. DESPITE THE U.S. COMMITMENT, HE SAID, OTHER VIETNAMESE ALSO CONTINUED TO DO THINGS THAT ARE BAD FOR THE RELATIONSHIP. BIN DECLARED THE U.S. HAD COMMITTED THE TWO SIDES TO WORK CLOSELY TOGETHER TO MAKE SURE NOTHING WOULD HAPPEN TO DISRUPT OR DAMAGE THE VISIT OF PRESIDENT CLINTON, BUT THE U.S. HAD FAILED TO PROVIDE VIETNAM WITH ANY INDICATIONS OF LY TONG'S ACTIONS. HE SAID THE U.S. MUST NOW ACT TO MAKE SURE THIS DOES NOT HAPPEN AGAIN
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AND WE SHOULD NOT "INTERFERE" IN TONG'S TRIAL, WHICH WOULD BE CONDUCTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH "INTERNATIONAL LAW" ON HIJACKINGS. HE SAID HE HAD A NOTE ON THIS TO PASS TO THE AMBASSADOR.

3. (SBU) THE AMBASSADOR RESPONDED BY SAYING HE HOPED THE VIETNAMESE HAD NOT CONCLUDED THE USG WAS IN ANY WAY CONNECTED WITH LY TONG'S ACTIONS AND SAID IF THAT WAS THE INTENT OF BIN'S MESSAGE IT WAS A MISTAKE. HE EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE THE USG WOULD COOPERATE WITH APPROPRIATE THAI AUTHORITIES REGARDING TONG'S TRIAL OR WITH VIETNAMESE ACTIONS IF IN FACT HE IS DEPORTED TO VIETNAM. HE SAID COUNTRIES OFTEN GAVE THE USG TOO MUCH CREDIT FOR ITS INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES AND THERE WAS NO WAY THE USG WOULD BE ABLE TO KNOW OF THE ACTIONS OF A SINGLE INDIVIDUAL SUCH AS THIS. GLANCING QUICKLY AT THE TEXT OF THE LETTER, THE AMBASSADOR SAID HE REJECTED

THE CONCLUSION IN THE LETTER THAT THE U.S. HAD NOT HONORED ITS COMMITMENT TO THE VIETNAMESE. HE SAID WE BOTH NEED TO WORK TOGETHER ON ISSUES SUCH AS THIS SO WE CAN BREAK DOWN THE BELIEF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT IS SOMEHOW WORKING TO "DISTURB" THE RELATIONSHIP.

14. (SBU) RETURNING TO HIS FIRST POINT, THE AMBASSADOR SAID THE LY TONG INCIDENT WAS SERIOUS BUT WHAT WAS FAR MORE SERIOUS FOR THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP WAS ANY CONCLUSION BY THE VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES THERE WAS A "CONSPIRACY" IN WHICH THE USG WAS IN SOME WAY INVOLVED IN THIS ACT. MOREOVER, IT WOULD BE EVEN MORE DAMAGING TO THE RELATIONSHIP IF YOUR LEADERS CONCLUDE THAT WE "KNEW SOMETHING WOULD HAPPEN AND THEN DIDN'T TELL YOU."
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THE AMBASSADOR STATED CATEGORICALLY, "WE DID NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THIS AND WE WERE NOT INVOLVED IN THE ACTION. NO ONE IN YOUR GOVERNMENT CAN SAY I HAVE EVER LIED TO YOU AND WHAT I AM TELLING YOU IS THE TRUTH." IN RESPONSE, BIN SAID HE "TOOK NOTE OF THE AMBASSADOR'S COMMENTS" BUT WANTED TO CLARIFY THAT VIETNAMESE PUBLIC OPINION HAD ALREADY RAISED THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE LY TONG ACTIONS AND THE PRESIDENT'S VISIT. HE SAID WHILE LY TONG IS A U.S. CITIZEN HE IS ALSO STILL VIETNAMESE AND THE VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT HAS ASKED THAI AUTHORITIES TO TURN HIM OVER TO VIETNAM FOR PROSECUTION. HE AGAIN URGED THE U.S. TO COOPERATE WITH THE THAIS IN THIS REGARD.

15. (SBU) THE AMBASSADOR INTERRUPTED AND SAID "YOU MUST UNDERSTAND HOW WE HAVE ALL BEEN WORKING TO ENSURE PEOPLE IN THE U.S. DID NOT CONTINUE TO SIMPLY FOCUS ON THE VIEWS OF THE MILITANTS WHO OPPOSE OUR RELATIONSHIP. WE DO THIS BY EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT THE REAL SITUATION AND BY URGING PEOPLE TO SEE FOR THEMSELVES WHAT CHANGES HAVE TAKEN PLACE. IF VIETNAM OVER-REACTS ON THIS ISSUE, LY TONG WILL SUCCEED IN HIS EFFORTS TO DISCREDIT YOUR GOVERNMENT AND ITS POLICIES TO LEAD THE COUNTRY." HE AGAIN SAID, "THIS LETTER IS WRONG AND THE ACCUSATIONS YOU MAKE ARE INCORRECT."

16. (SBU) BIN REPLIED BY AGREEING THE LY TONG ACTIONS
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HAD BEEN "DETRIMENTAL TO THE RELATIONSHIP" BUT DISAGREED THAT THE NOTE WAS WRONG. "THE NOTE," HE SAID, "SIMPLY ASKS THE USG TO ENSURE SUCH THINGS DO NOT HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE." THE AMBASSADOR RESPONDED IMMEDIATELY SAYING THE NOTE INCLUDES MUCH MORE. HE READ THE TEXT WHICH CLEARLY STATES THE USG HAS FAILED TO KEEP VIETNAM INFORMED ON EVENTS "DESIGNED TO CREATE DISTURBANCES OR SPREAD TERROR IN VIETNAM" DURING THE VISIT. THE AMBASSADOR SAID EMPHATICALLY, "THIS IS ALSO AN ACCUSATION DIRECTLY MADE AGAINST ME, SINCE I WAS THE ONE WHO PROMISED YOU SUCH COOPERATION IN THE FIRST PLACE." YOU ACCUSE ME AND MY GOVERNMENT OF THINGS WE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT AT ALL. YOU ARE RISKING THE SUCCESS OF THIS VISIT WITH SUCH ACCUSATIONS." BIN REITERATED HIS POINT THAT THE USG HAD REQUESTED TONG'S RELEASE AND BOTH AMBASSADOR AND DCM REJECTED THIS ASSERTION, SAYING EMBASSY HAD REQUESTED ALL AMERICANS INCARCERATED IN VIETNAM BE CONSIDERED FOR RELEASE DURING THE 1998 AMNESTY.

17. (SBU) BIN TWICE SAID IT "WAS A PITY THE AMBASSADOR WAS REACTING THIS WAY" AND THE MEETING CONCLUDED WITH THE AMBASSADOR AGAIN "REJECTING WITHOUT RESERVATION" THE CONTENTS OF THE VIETNAMESE NOTE.

18. (SBU) FOLLOWING THE MEETING, VICE MINISTER BIN'S OFFICE CALLED THE DCM TO ASK US TO DESTROY THE UNOFFICIAL TRANSLATION OF THE VIETNAMESE NOTE AND HA HUY THONG, THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAS DEPARTMENT, LATER INDICATED IT WAS BECAUSE THE ENGLISH TEXT HAD OMITTED A PARAGRAPH IN THE ORIGINAL VIETNAMESE
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TEXT. THAT PARAGRAPH IS HIGHLIGHTED IN THE SEPTTEL WHICH CONTAINS THE TEXT OF THE VIETNAMESE NOTE. THONG THEN TOLD DCM HE WAS ALSO SENDING HIM A COPY OF THE "NOTES" WHICH HAD BEEN PREPARED FOR VICE MINISTER BIN FOR USE IN HIS MEETING. THONG SAID, "YOU CAN USE THEM ANY WAY YOU WISH." EMBASSY TRANSLATION OF THOSE TALKING POINTS IS INCLUDED ALONG WITH THE TEXT OF THE VIETNAMESE DIPLOMATIC NOTE.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES WERE BOUND TO RAISE THE LY TONG INCIDENT AND TO USE HIS RELEASE FROM DETENTION, RETURN TO THE U.S., AND REPEAT HIJACKING OF AN AIRCRAFT TO CRITICIZE THE USG FOR FAILING TO PREVENT SUCH ACTIONS FROM TAKING PLACE. THEY HAVE, HOWEVER, IN THIS NOTE TAKEN THE ISSUE A LOT

FURTHER THAN WAS NECESSARY AND PRUDENT. DELIBERATELY IMPUGNING THE VERACITY OF THE USG AND ACCUSING US OF DIRECT KNOWLEDGE OF TONG'S ACTIONS SUGGESTS TOO MANY PEOPLE IN THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THE LEADERSHIP ARE UNWILLING TO TRUST WHERE THIS RELATIONSHIP NOW STANDS. THEY ACCEPT AS A MATTER OF FAITH THE TIMING OF TONG'S ACTIONS TO COINCIDE WITH THE PRESIDENT'S WELCOME IN HANOI WAS ORCHESTRATED. THEY BELIEVE THE USG CONTINUES TO HARBOR RESENTMENT OVER THE WAR AND THAT THE USG IS SIMPLY USING DIFFERENT METHODS TO PURSUE THE OVERTHROW OF THE VIETNAMESE REGIME. THE APPEARANCE, CONCURRENT WITH THE PRESIDENT'S VISIT, OF AN ARTICLE IN VIETNAM'S MILITARY NEWSPAPER BY A SENIOR MILITARY LEADER CONDEMNING ATTEMPTS TO PROMOTE "PEACEFUL EVOLUTION" AND HIS PLEDGE THE ARMY WILL DESTROY ANY SUCH ACTIVITIES IS ANOTHER REFLECTION OF THAT VIEW. WE STILL, AS THE

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AMBASSADOR HAS NOTED, HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO TO MAKE THE RELATIONSHIP AS STRONG AS WE HOPED IT MIGHT NOW BE.

10. (SBU) THE MFA'S UNPRECEDENTED TRANSMISSION OF THE NOTES FROM WHICH VICE MINISTER BIN SPOKE IS A CLEAR EFFORT TO DISSOCIATE THE MFA FROM THIS NEGATIVE VIEW OF THE U.S.-VIETNAM RELATIONSHIP. BIN'S MFA PREPARED NOTES DO NOT MAKE ANY EXPLICIT LINKAGE BETWEEN THE U.S. PLEDGES AND TONG'S ACTIONS AND MERELY ASSERT, AS BIN AT ONE POINT TRIED TO EMPHASIZE, THAT THE USG SHOULD WORK TO PREVENT THIS FROM OCCURRING IN THE FUTURE. (NOTE: BIN'S OFFICE CALLED ONLY TO RELATE INFORMATION ABOUT THE INCOMPLETE TEXT OF THE DIPLOMATIC NOTE. IT WAS THE AMERICAS DEPARTMENT DEPUTY DIRECTOR WHO RELATED THE INFORMATION ABOUT THE TALKING POINTS AND SENT THEM TO THE DCM. IT IS, THEREFORE, UNCLEAR WHETHER BIN HAS PERSONALLY DISTANCED HIMSELF FROM THE TEXT BY EMPHASIZING THE MORE GENERAL NATURE OF HIS TALKING POINTS. IT IS CLEAR, HOWEVER, THE MFA AMERICAS DEPARTMENT IS SIGNALING IT HAD NOT BEEN INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS OF CREATING THE DIPLOMATIC NOTE AND PRESUMABLY ALSO DISAPPROVED OF ITS CONTENT. END NOTE)

11. (SBU) THE AMBASSADOR'S STRAIGHT-FORWARD REJECTION OF THE VIETNAMESE NOTE LEAVES THE USG POSITION QUITE CLEAR. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER THE VIETNAMESE WILL LET THE MATTER DROP AND SIMPLY MOVE ON TO

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DEVELOPING THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF OUR RELATIONSHIP. WE SUSPECT THEY WILL LIKELY FOR A TIME TRY TO DO BOTH, BALANCING PRIVATE DIALOGUES ON BILATERAL ISSUES WITH PUBLIC DENUNCIATIONS OF ISSUES THAT READERS WILL SEE AS TARGETED AGAINST THE U.S. THE AMBASSADOR STRONGLY RECOMMENDS THAT WE RESPOND QUICKLY AND EMPHATICALLY WITH A NOTE DENYING THE ALLEGATIONS CONTAINED IN THE VIETNAMESE NOTE. FURTHER, WE BELIEVE THE DEPARTMENT SHOULD CALL IN THE CHARGE' AND/OR AMBASSADOR BANG AS SOON AS HE RETURNS TO WASHINGTON AND AGAIN FORMALLY REJECT THE CONTENTS OF THE VIETNAMESE NOTE. WE RECOMMEND UNDER SECRETARY PICKERING BE ASKED TO TAKE ON THIS RESPONSIBILITY TO INDICATE THE HIGH-LEVEL CONCERN OF THE DEPARTMENT AND THE USG ABOUT THE SERIOUS NATURE OF THE VIETNAMESE ACCUSATIONS.

PETERSON

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